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Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory

ISSN: 0740-770X (Print) 1748-5819 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rwap20

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To cite this article: José Esteban Muñoz (2006) The Vulnerability Artist: Nao Bustamante And the Sad Beauty of Reparation, Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory, 16:2, 191-200, DOI: 10.1080/07407700600744386

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07407700600744386

Published online: 18 Feb 2007.

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Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory,
Vol. 16, No. 2, July 2006, 191–200

Routledge
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THE VULNERABILITY ARTIST: NAO BUSTAMANTE AND THE SAD BEAUTY OF REPARATION

José Esteban Muñoz

In "The Vulnerability Artist: Nao Bustamante and the Sad Beauty of Reparation" Muñoz reconceives Kafka's "Hunger Artist" to consider different modes of affective comportment in relation to the lives of people of color. Focusing on the work of performance artist Nao Bustamante, Muñoz proposes that affect might be a better gauge than identity to understand the particularity of different groups (including sexual and ethnic minorities). Considering those moments in which Bustamante offers herself up as vulnerable to the negative affects of her audiences. Muñoz disscusses how the solicitation of negative affect provides opportunities for reparation for the body burdened by racism, homophobia, or sexism.

In her 1992 video, *Rosa Does Joan*, Nao Bustamante's performance persona Rosa appears on the comedian/and home shopping maven's then daytime talk show (Figure 1). She poses as an exhibitionist who shares her sexual tales and describes her shocking proclivities to Rivers, a seemingly titillated audience and an expert who evaluates her authenticity as an exhibitionist. This expert, a Dr Georgia Witkins, is the author of *Passions: How to manage despair, fear, rage and guilt and heighten your capacity for joy, love, hope and awe*, and her author's blurb indicates that she has been a guest expert on over 100 television programs, including *Donahue*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *20/20*, *Today*, *Good Morning America* and *Hour Magazine*. A clinical psychologist, her PhD certifies that Rosa, Bustamante's persona, is the "real deal": an authentic exhibitionist. Rivers describes the book that Witkins is promoting as a guide for those who cannot control their emotions and the book's subtitle promises to help the reader with the management of emotion. This concept of affective management speaks to a language of "difference management" that took hold in different spheres in the 1990s. This framing of multicultural difference as manageable deviation is descriptive of the actual "problem" with difference from the vantage point of corporate and state interests. Feeling, excessive, minimal, or just wrong, in one's affective response to the world needs to be managed if queers, people of color, or other minoritarian subjects are to be incorporated in a larger social matrix—or so speaks the corporate ethos behind affect management. "Passions,"

ISSN 0740-770X print/ISSN 1748-5819 online/06/020191–10 © 2006 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/07407700600744386

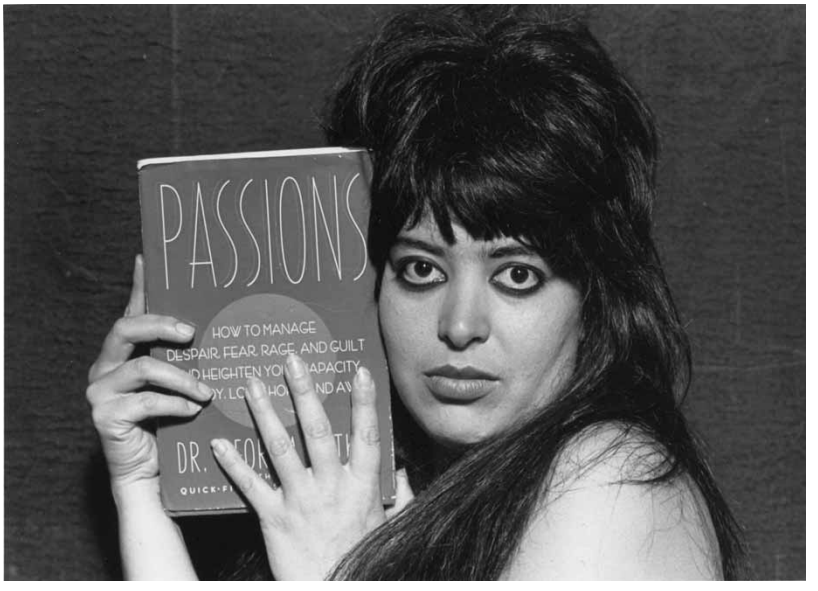

FIGURE 1
Nao Bustamante as Rosa. (photo: Liz Zivic)

are emotional manifestations that do not conform to dominant modes of comportment or expression.

In the video *Rosa Does Joan*, Bustamante becomes Rosa, a character or persona that she devises for the purpose of guerrilla-style stunt performance. This persona-style performance is consistent in all the artist's work. Rosa is part of a continuum of characters who feel too much or not enough, whose affective attachments and associations do not cohere or correspond. They thus signify as people whose affective life and subsequent comportment do not correspond to normative affective behavior. In this video the performance artist is strangely "authenticated" as a problem within normative protocols of affective management. It is a "stunt performance" insofar as Bustamante posed as an exhibitionist, a role she does not identify as, and the talk show host, audience, and production staff are working under the assumption that she is not playing a character, but instead being herself.

For the video documentation of Bustamante's Rosa piece she wears a black wig and heavy make-up. That look, dark hair and eyes, and the character's name announce her as a Latina. Her fictional public sex encounter with a "multi-gendered ambisexual" at a public aquarium marks her as a sexual deviant, or a queer. I want to contend that Witkins is indeed correct when she confirms Rosa as the "real deal" inasmuch as both the character and the artist behind her are examples of affective particularity that registers as excessive. The hoax

performance is representative of a certain guerrilla-style performance that Bustamante often employs in the corpus of her work. As Rosa begins to tell Joan about her kinky exploits in various public places she has indeed exposed herself as not being capable of maintaining proper affective comportment within the social. Rivers's now cancelled talk show (and other like it) represent a phenomenon that we can only describe as the contemporary freak show. In this instance, however, Bustamante hijacks the show and uses it as a site to insist upon an affective particularity that cannot be managed within the protocols of normative North American affective comportment. Rosa's trip to the dark continent of daytime talk shows and its subsequent documentation charts the ways in which affective difference is positioned as popular amusement in mass culture. An affective difference which, after having been consumed as titillation and re-codified as a pathology, can be attended to with an over-the-counter aid, like a "how-to book."

Witkins's book recommends that the reader contain what Sianne Ngai has recently classified as "Ugly Feelings" in her book by that title (Ngai 2005). Witkins advocates and promotes positive feelings like joy, love, hope, and awe over "ugly feelings"—while a queer or ethnic spectator may indeed not understand how a phenomenon like exhibitionism qualifies as what Witkins marks as the passions that need to be contained. "Despair, fear, rage, and guilt" are indeed not necessarily the feelings at the center of much exhibitionist practice, for we can imagine the role her positive affects, "love, hope, or awe," play in animating exhibitionism. Yet like other non-conformist sexual performances and practices, exhibitionism still qualifies as negative within the mediatized field of affective televisual representation. Thus positive affects in the service of queer desire are the kinds of passions that need to be managed. Ngai describes *ugly feelings* as representing "interpretations of predicaments," which she delineates as "signs that render visible different registers of problems that obstruct agency" (2005, 3). In my forthcoming book I discuss *brown feelings* as being manifestations of the ways in which ethnic modes of comportment not only represent anti-normative affect, but also challenge the ways in which dominant ideology prescribes certain codes of normative comportment. Exhibitionism is a mode of comportment that insists on a certain decibel of emotion, one that like many aspects of Latino culture are considered too loud or unharmonious by normative ears. Exhibitionism scrambles the public/private dictates of normative desire. Private feelings or desires are broadcast in a fashion that calls attention to the codes of conduct that structure public emotion.

When speaking of exhibitionism and the ethnic body it would be remiss not to cite the important work of scholars like Coco Fusco who locate the origins of performance as not in Dada or surrealism, but the exhibition of captured and enslaved people compelled to perform for colonial power (Fusco 1995). Similarly, Saidiya Hartman's important analysis of the performance of the chattel slavery and its most sinister stage, the auction bloc, is also an important and formative source for my analysis (Hartman 1997). I will argue that Bustamante's

performance is a reparative endeavor that engages the difficult "other" history of performance. By reparative, I want to call attention to the ways in which Bustamente's performance practice engages and re-imagines what has been history of violence, degradation, and compulsory performance. For female artist of color to engage this field is not only historically loaded, but it is also extremely vulnerable making.

The broadcasting of affect makes Bustamante what I want to call a vulnerability artist. This label of vulnerability artist is meant to invoke Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" (Kafka 1971). In Kafka's tale the hunger artist's performances of self-imposed starvation in the village square once held the community's interests. His suffering and prone body on display was a popular amusement for a bygone era. Once his act becomes outmoded, the artist, now demoted from town square to circus midway oddity, finally dies on losing the interest and attention of the populace. That story's tragic protagonist, a man who performed a ritual performance associated with a private bodily practice, fasting, is also a story about a broadcaster of affect. Gilles Deleuze's take on Spinoza's ethics and their relation to affect proposes that affect is a sign that registers on the body. For Deleuze, following Spinoza, affection indicates the state of a body affected by others (Deleuze 1997). Affect marks the passage of one state to another as an increase or decrease in the body's power. Thus affect, projected onto another or by the other affects one's agency. For Ngai bad feelings are indicative of an obstruction of agency. By provisionally linking these two theorists' perspectives, one can see the ways in which affect that is representative of ugly feelings is indeed a predicament that obstructs agency.

Bustmante's art practice is descriptive of the ways in which "ugly feelings" weigh down a subject, challenging the actualization of agency. In a performance titled *Sans Gravity*, an image and sound study renders "the weight of affect"; in *Sans Gravity* the artist has various assistants strap plastic bags full of water to her body (Figure 2). Bag is taped upon bag and the artist begins to look like a monstrosity. She lumbers through the performance space, a gigantic watery beast and the spectator is left to think about the burden of other people's affect on one's own self. But beyond the metaphorical, the actual body is vulnerable to the point of duress. The piece also underscores this sense of alienation produced by affective projection via the work's sound component. The artist's body is also wired for sound and one hears a sloshing, submerged corpulence. All bodies are vulnerable to the affect of others. If we are to understand the force of cultural logics like racism or homophobia, it seems that they are, at an essential level, affective constructs, which is to say feelings projected outwards and inwards. Gleaning such knowledge, knowing that our affect does not simply flow out of us, but, instead, tells us a story about our relationality to ourselves but also to groups, we feel a sense of belonging to groups that inspire a sense of un-belonging. A focus on affect potentially denaturalizes experiences like racism or homophobia. We are all weighed down, burdened, by emotions that are radiated toward us. And we all seek relief.

FIGURE 2
Sans Gravity. (photo: Nao Bustamante)

The drama of this performance, and its resolution, involves the audience lifting the artist's burden. In the literal yet poetic syntax of Bustamante's performance practice, this is done with spikes, needles, and sharp objects. The newly animated audience pokes the artist and we see her body overwhelmed. The prods and pins that besiege the artist function as a literalized choreography of affective projection. Audience members witness the individual being overwhelmed by the group. This is worth further consideration. The hunger artist in Kafka's story disappears because his mode of performance has become antiquated and the public no longer showers him with affective recognition. Bustamante's story complicates the pop ego psychological formulation that would come from a source like Witkins, whose statements would boil down to a formulation like, "good feelings are the only affect that nourishes the self." The artist needs the projected affect of others, visualized as spikes, to release her burden. In *Sans Gravity*, bad feelings are not automatically negatively valenced insofar as they are constitutive of subjectivity. In this way the vulnerability artist's drama is the reverse of what happens to the hunger artist. Her affective burden is ruptured by the sharp projections of the affect of others, but this conjoining of negative affective is strangely something like a reparative moment.

Negative affect, projected by the group, stabs the burdened body and soul of the vulnerability artist. But rather than destroying this object, it is saved as in the same way a bad object can be saved in Melanie's Klein's psychoanalytic choreography. Touched by the other's bad feelings, the vulnerability artist is saved or repaired in the first moment. This reparation happens on a symbolic

register in which the performance's resolution is arrived at in the act of liberation or extraction of self from the affective burden of ugly feelings. In a slightly later moment she is more than saved and transformed from monster to human fountain. The scene of monstrosity is transformed as the vulnerability becomes a strange monument to the sad beauty of reparation. The moment she is touched by the other she projects onto the world/audience as she literally spills forth, becoming a living cascade sculpture, spilling out onto the world.

The vulnerability artist is projected upon by the world and she also projects out. Turning to an earlier performance, one planned as a "celebration" of the anniversary of the discovery of America, *Indigurrito* (1992) stages a relational drama around race and emotion. Bustamante's character in this performance is a sort of post-modern Aztec Priestess/Dominatrix. She is interested in addressing a negative aspect and her character attempts to naïvely cleanse men of their ugly feelings, specifically white guilt. She does so by strapping a burrito to crotch, using the harnessing device associated with dildo play. The harness matches the rest of her highly sexualized yet satirical costume for the performance. She invites white men to "absolve" themselves of historical guilt. The burrito is vegetarian. They bow before her and partake in the reparative ritual (Figure 3).

The supplicant in this fake ritualistic performance wants to escape the burden of negative affect that haunts racial and sexual relations. Biting the mythical phallus of the burrito, while a joke, also renders an account of affect's crisscrossing economy. The joke is centered on a wish/desire for the other to absolve us of our negative emotions with a magical gesture. Bad feeling can simply be bitten away, ingested by the other. This performance thus stages another fantasy of reparation. The white men on stage are absolving their own burden of guilt in the comical ritual but the artist is also making her bad feelings available, prone and vulnerable.

The laughter the performance solicits is of a highbrow nature insofar as the butt of the joke is not only white men in general, but, to a certain extent, one white man in particular: Freud. The performance she is staging is an imagined drama of castration anxiety. One is reminded of seemingly countless moments from the early days of queer theory where essays about the lesbian phallus reigned. I want to suggest that this performance is a continuation of such a project that de-linked the phallus from heteronormative parameters and biological masculinity. This fantastical scene represents a further particularizing of this Oedipal script by replacing the universal (read white) penis that stands in for the phallus in crude psychological formulations with a highly racialized and particular tubular object: the burrito.

But the burrito is not only Mexican in Bustamante's harness. It is also imbued with energies that can best be described as queer. On one luxurious and arch level, it's pure camp. (Imagine! That girl straps on a burrito!) But after recently teaching that performance documentation to a large, undergraduate lecture class, I had a pedagogical moment that further explicated the queerness of the piece. One young man, a first-year student, explained that the tape made

FIGURE 3
Bustamante and participant in *Indigurrito*.

him uncomfortable insofar as the men on stage worshiping the burrito were simulating felatio. I thought this aspect of the gag was so obvious that it need not be addressed in any depth. But indeed this playful humiliation of white men, by a woman, asking them to play the sodomite was a flashpoint for this student. On further reflection, I realized that this aspect of *Induggrito* was as much about straight masculinity and its anxieties of being undone through one highly ritualized (and reified) sexual act as it was about "becoming" a homosexual. In this case, the vulnerability artist sheds illumination on the weakness in the armor we know as straight masculinity. This anxiousness about straight men blowing each other permeates this historical moment in masculinity and American popular culture. Straight male to male humiliation is often thematized, in various popular musical genres and the deeply homoerotic genre of industrial prison

FIGURE 4
Bustamante in *America the Beautiful*.

complex narratives like HBO's *OZ*, by the primal humiliation of one straight man sucking off another in scenes of situational or coerced sexuality. This too falls into the satirical scope of Bustamante's work.

In a similar fashion *America the Beautiful* represents another character that interestingly mirrors the hunger artist, an individual in need of public feelings, a character representing a raw need for public emotion and recognition. The protagonist in *America the Beautiful* (Figure 4) is a grotesquerie seeking approval, attempting to both mold her body and her comportment to be in sync with dominant maps of looking and feeling, especially looking and feeling both female and white. Her body and comportment is, by standardized expectations, excessive. Yet she seeks the approval or sanction of the normative. The piece's humor is produced by her stark and abject need for approval.

America the Beautiful commences when a nude Bustamante takes the stage and begins a performance of physical transformation. She puts a matted blonde

wig on her head and coats it with hair spray. As maniacal circus music plays Bustamante applies lipstick and face powder with great exaggeration. The wig and the face have a whitening-up effect. She then wraps translucent masking tape around her waist, stomach and legs and reshapes her large curvy body. Standing on a stool, she then attempts to strap on high-heel shoes. This act seems incredibly dangerous and throughout it seems as though she will fall and injure herself. Throughout the rest of the performance the concerned spectator feels the artist's great neediness and considerable vulnerability.

The comedy and the drama is one of both vulnerability and failure. There are two aspects of this performance that I wish to linger on. One is the way in which body is animated by affect and affect itself becomes, in Deleuze's (1997) lexicon, a sign. In this sense the pantomime is a language of and through affect. The bittersweet humor is in accordance with the hunger artist's desire to be acknowledged by the public, his public, a public that knows itself through shared emotion. And in the fashion that the hunger artist loses his luster by losing an audience that is desperately needed, Bustamante's character is failing to be seen or heard or felt in a way that registers as a particularity in belonging and difference. Like the hunger artist, the vulnerability is this persona, an incarnation that craves interest and applause by the audience.

After performing several amateurish feats—stunts like climbing a rickety ladder that might crash down at any moment and performing a weird, sonic medley by blowing into jugs—the character demands applause. She gets quite a bit of applause but is not satisfied with it. Eventually she is still demanding applause long after the performance is over. While she stomps menacingly at the edge of the stage she holds a bouquet of roses that was thrown to her earlier. The performance ends as the character's monstrous rage consumes her and she begins to bite and chew at the roses in an animalistic frenzy, spitting mutilated roses at the audience. The vulnerability artist, like the hunger artist, is undone by her need of affirmative feelings. But along the way, *America the Beautiful*'s performance of Nietzschean-like *ressentiment* clearly outlines the limits of affirmative affect, while gesturing to the ways in which agency can perhaps be accessed through exploration of the negative.

A performance that generated negative affect is *Sparkler*. This performance, according to the performer, elicited her first piece of hate mail. The two-minute performance begins with a totally dark bar. At some point a sparkler is lit and it provides the only illumination. The sparkler of the title emerges from what seems to be her ass. She is actually holding it with her hand from between her legs. The sparkler is the only illumination available. It is a torch that insists on affective difference and particularity. Bustamante's body is an affective beacon, which is to say that she illuminates a particular predicament around agency within the social: a feeling queer, a feeling brown, that is both about belonging and the failure to belong. A Latina body, a queer body, radiating a certain affective signature that is recognizable to many. This performance was met with hate mail that commented on the performance's vulgarity. This affective sign was therefore seen as

excessive. It generated bad feelings in others, perhaps challenging normative affective comportment's seamless claim to agency. Indeed within normative codes of affective comportment, Bustamante's performance is *too much*. It does transmit a kind of particularity that illicits "ugly feelings." *Sparkler*'s stark simplicity and insistence on affective particularity via performance lingers in the mind of the spectator.

Antagonistic feelings, negative affect, and ugly feelings are used in the artist's work in a fashion that we can best describe as reparative insofar as negativity is not simply cleaned but viewed as constitutive of subjectivity. This performance and the feelings it generates, despite its ephemeral nature, do not disappear. The performance, its documentation via video and my writing practice, become ephemeral resources for many who are drawn to the possibilities it suggest, like moths to a flame.

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